

NANSEN'S STUDY OF ESKIMO LIFE.

ESKIMO LIFE. By Fridtjof Nansen. Translated by William Archer. With Illustrations. 8vo. New-York: Longmans, Green & Co.

Dr. Nansen, in his account of his memorable journey across Greenland, published several years ago, informed his readers that he had made an extended visit among the Eskimo people before his return. This sojourn he made, we believe, not from choice, but from some kind of necessity. Doubtless, the fate which compelled the delay seemed at the time a stern one, but he must long since have realized that the cloud had a silvern, if not a golden, lining, since the sojourn enabled him to write this charming account of Eskimo life.

Dr. Nansen possesses more than one strong quality as a traveler, and one at least he possesses in an unusually strong degree. He has a magnificent faculty for taking things as he finds them. From him we never hear vain complaints and unavailing regrets about anything that goes not to his satisfaction. Moreover, he often has excuses for many things. He can see situations as they are, their causes, he can also understand, and then easily throws himself into sympathy with the facts with which he is confronted.

In this volume he writes of the Eskimos much as might some Eskimo who had been educated in a German university. Former writers have been shocked by manners and customs denoting gross immorality, but Dr. Nansen, with his sympathizing mind and his clearness of vision, becomes tolerant. He can see, if not the causes of improper acts, at least the absence of preventive influences. Thus, when he has seen men and women passing the long Winter months crowded into half-subterranean homes, where they sleep on benches packed together like fish on a market man's table, he can overlook their indifference as to exposure of their legs and torso. And, again, when he understands that European notions respecting legitimate children have sprung very largely from European ideas respecting the inheritance of property, he can understand why the Eskimo, who, strictly speaking, never has any property, has not acquired those strict notions. With the Eskimo the desire for children springs not from a wish to have an heir, but from a wish to enlarge the population and to increase the working force of his own household, and hence he is not as exacting as the Europeans in matters affecting paternity.

Dr. Nansen believes great harm has been done the Eskimo by the European, and writes warmly in his defense. Indeed, there are chapters of this book in which he plays the part of vigorous advocate. "I am weak enough," says he, "to feel compassion for a declining race, which is, perhaps, beyond all help, since it is already stung with the venom of our civilization." The results which he saw stirred him to indignation, and he was filled with a burning desire to send the truth "reverberating over the whole world." We cannot deny to Dr. Nansen knowledge of the facts he here sets in formidable array, for he had exceptional opportunities to observe and weigh what he saw. For a whole Winter he dwelt with these people, living in their huts, taking part in their hunting, and aiming, so far as he could, to live their life and learn their language.

He was early moved to sympathy with their lot, and to love their land. Greenland he found "touched with all the dream-like beauty of the fairy land of his childish imagination. He found the scenery of his own Norway repeated in still nobler, purer forms." The Eskimo himself has come to love deeply the land he lives in, for it is to him the world, and he is the human race. And yet, life for him begins at the point where other races the world over have found that life was impossible. He has bravely faced his grim destiny and has learned to love it.

Dr. Nansen in time found the brown Eskimo faces "gleaming with health and fat," even really pleasing, for they "reflected the free life of nature, and suggested to my mind pictures of blue sea, with gracious and glittering sunshine." Distinct notes of the Eskimo character are good humor, peaceableness, and an even temper. He desires to stand on a good footing with other men, is careful not to offend his neighbors, and when he believes himself wronged, instead of fighting a duel, engages in a song contest in public, where his highest hope is to make his enemy appear ridiculous in the eyes of others. He wants no other revenge. Dr. Nansen bears testimony to his possession of good natural gifts of mind. At the game of draughts Dr. Nansen was often astonished at the ability and foresight shown. The Eskimo learns to read and write with comparative ease, and if he stumbles over arithmetic, it is due to causes as old as the race itself.

Of the work done by missionaries, Dr. Nansen writes in severe criticism. In aiming to overturn an entire social order they have made great errors. To convert that wild and free race of hunters into a civilized Christian nation was impossible, except as the work of a long period of time. Christianity aimed to lead them into a foreign world and to make them think in a new way. Even its system of faith and its conception of heaven have fallen on understandings that cannot grasp them. Our notions of a paradise, with white-robed angels, silver and gold, gorgeous raiment, and shining mansions, have no charm for them. Such things the Eskimo has never dreamed of, and he cares not for them. To him earthly riches have no value. His ideal heaven would rather be a warm mud hut, with plenty of seal food, fair weather, and good hunting grounds.

The Eskimo is living in the Stone Age, and, while we have taken iron to him, he does not catch more seals, but fewer, than before. Even the rifle has done him harm. He now slaughters reindeer for a small and momentary gain, and the result is that the reindeer has been almost exterminated, whereas before their numbers were never seriously diminished by hunting. Moreover, use of the rifle at sea has led to decline in skill in the use of the harpoon, and the harpoon is still of vital importance, because it alone can be used in rough weather. In fact, it is a better weapon than the rifle in the sense that the hunter is sure of his game, whereas, with the rifle as many seals escape wounded or die to no purpose as are taken home.

The foods taken to the Eskimo from Europe have done him harm, and especial harm has come from coffee, tobacco, and whisky, while European finery has made him foolishly extravagant. He now may often be seen clad in European rags instead of warm fur garments. There has been a continuous decline in his well-being until his condition is one of almost hopeless poverty and weakness. In name, at least, all the Greenlanders of the west coast are Christians, but their state is one of degeneration and decadence. This leads Dr. Nansen to put the problem thus forcibly:

"Can an Eskimo who is nominally a Christian, but who cannot support his family, is in ill-health, and is sinking into deeper and deeper misery, be held much more enviable than a heathen who lives in spiritual darkness, but can support his family, is robust in body, and thoroughly contented with life? If he could see his true interest the Eskimo would assuredly put up this fervent petition: God save me from my friends; my enemies I can deal with myself."

Dr. Nansen is convinced that the only hope lies in the gradual withdrawal of Europeans from the country. Left to himself, the Eskimo might recover his old habits, and the race thus be saved. Otherwise, he can see no destiny for a people whom he loves except one of decline and an utter passing away.